

## *Norfolk Virginian Pilot on Desegregation, December 4, 1955*

### **Pilot Bill Without a Compass**

As expected the General Assembly has passed the emergency act of the Gray Commission's legislative program by an overwhelmingly majority. In the House of Delegates the vote was 95 to 3 for the bill and in the State Senate the vote was 38 to 1. Now that the special session has set in motion the machinery for amending Section 141 of the State Constitution by a limited convention, the stark fact is that no more is known about the Gray Commission's tuition payment plan than when the Assembly convened. The pilot bill providing for a referendum on the question of amending Section 141 has been approved, but it leads to no charted program. No compass is supplied.

Just before the General Assembly took final action on the bill Governor Stanley at a press conference said that "we realize that an informative campaign must be put on so that the voters participating will fully understand what they are voting on." This statement was made immediately after the Governor had met with the 32 members of the Gray Commission, all members of the General Assembly, to discuss the referendum date and to plan a campaign to win public support for the calling of the constitutional convention. Would such a campaign include the disclosure of the details of the plan, if the Gray Commission has one, of how public funds would be used to pay the tuition in private schools of pupils whose parents did not wish them to attend an integrated Virginia public school?

If there is such a plan and Governor Stanley knows how it would be administered and in what buildings and at what costs, he missed an ideal opportunity to disclose it to the General Assembly. His brief message to the special session possessed dignity of diction but disclosed nothing except the intent of the Gray Commission's legislative design. "No pupil," said the Governor, "would be required to attend any school, open to Negro and white children, against the wishes of his parents, and localities temporarily without public schools would still have some means of educating their children." With this statement of purpose, but without any statement of plan, the Governor asked the special session to pass the Gray Commission's pilot bill as an emergency act.

Senator Garland Gray himself addressed the General Assembly but dealt only in the most general way with the program his commission has recommended. His personal appeal was largely a plea that the entire State understand the perplexing dilemma of the Southside counties. He did not

answer the question as to whether the program his commission has proposed will do damage difficult to repair to the public school system of the entire State. Senator Gray, indeed, seemed to be implicitly asking the members of the General Assembly and the people of Virginia to have faith in his program. Yet this confidence can rest only on the basis of mutuality when it relates to a program of government as fundamental as the conduct of the public schools. If Governor Stanley and Senator Gray and leaders of the General Assembly want the faith of Virginians in the program that is now being set in motion, they should seek it by the fullest disclosure of what the plans are for legislation at the regular session of the General Assembly in January, if the people vote for a constitutional convention and the convention amends Section 141 to permit tuition payments for pupils who attend private schools. The people have a right to know what the legislative design is to be for the tuition payment plan schools.

There was an assignment plan recommended by the Gray Commission. But the heart of its program is the tuition payment plan. David J. Mays, the counsel for the Gray Commission, has conceded that in some parts of Virginia there may be "some integration" in the schools. The Gray Commission proposes a plan under which if there is any degree of integration in any school the parents of hundreds of children might elect to withdraw them from school and draw from the State tuition payments for their education. Under such a nebulous plan there might be thousands of Virginia school children for whom there were no schools. At least neither the Gray Commission nor Governor Stanley has given any intimation of what kind of private school system is being planned for them.

Such a chaotic prospect is dark and dismaying. Governor Stanley cannot expect Virginians to vote for the calling of a constitutional convention to provide for the setting up of an alternate school system in Virginia without a chart or design for that system. Virginians, and especially the educational leaders of the State, must rise to the challenge of discussion. The future of the public school system is at stake and that means the future of literacy and the skills upon which progress in a State of growing industrialization depend. The people of Virginia should not be expected to vote for the Gray Commission's program as the best program until it is made clear and comprehensible, or until it is given a meaning in terms of practical administration which it does not now possess.

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